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ABSTRACT

Research in social gerontology has become increasingly concerned with issues related to race, ethnicity, national origin and gender. The bulk of this research has merely described interesting differences among groups. This presentation suggests that theory and research on race, ethnicity, and gender groups, particularly in a noncomparative paradigm, can have important consequences for developing a general theory in the social and behavioral sciences. Examples from contemporary research are used to illustrate this point. It is proposed that these examples may provide a prototype for the type of theorizing and research using race, ethnicity, and gender that will be more pluralistic, expand social science concepts, measures, and approaches, and lead to theories of human development and aging that may be more universal. Thirty-one references are attached. (Author/TE)

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The Conceptual Status of Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Social Gerontological Theory and Research

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Running Head: Status of Race and Ethnicity

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Abstract

Research in social gerontology has become increasingly concerned with issues related to race, ethnicity, national origin and gender. The bulk of this research has merely described interesting differences among groups. It is suggested in this presentation that theory and research on race, ethnicity and gender groups, particularly in a non-comparative paradigm, can have important consequences for the development of general theory in the social and behavioral sciences. Examples from contemporary research are used to illustrate this point. It is proposed that these examples may provide a prototype for the type of theorizing and research using race, ethnicity and gender that will be more pluralistic, expand social science concepts, measures and approaches, and lead to theories of human development and aging that may be more universal.

The Conceptual Status of Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Social Gerontological Theory and Research

The role of race, ethnicity and minority status in human development and aging has received increased attention in social gerontology in recent years (McNeely and Colen, 1983; Manuel 1982; J. Jackson, 1980; 1982; 1985; Jackson, 1989; Gelfand and Kutzik, 1979; Gelfand, 1992; Gelfand and Baressi, 1987; Holzberg, 1982a; 1982b; Gibson, 1989; Markides, 1982; Palmore, 1984). No consensus, however, exists regarding the exact role of these factors (Markides, 1982; Holzberg, 1982b). Many social gerontologists have suggested that the contribution of race and ethnicity in human development and aging has been under-valued (Jackson, 1980; Levine, 1982). For example, Jackson (1985) recently proposed the need for the field of " ethnogerontology ", which is the study of causes, processes and consequences of race, national origin, and culture on individual and population aging.

Research conducted upon status groups, such as Blacks, Hispanics, Asian Americans and women, however, is not viewed as being in the mainstream of the social and behavioral sciences (Jones, 1983; Lott, 1985). The importance of such research for understanding basic processes and behaviors is often questioned. This devaluation implies that basic processes can or should be studied only within the dominant group and culture or in a comparative framework that often does not consider important intra-group distinctions. There are undoubtedly many factors that contribute to the lack of importance paid to research on racial/ethnic groups Levine, 1982). I believe, however, that a major reason is the failure to appreciate the potential scientific contribution that research on these groups may make.

My focus is on how research on racial/ethnic groups may contribute to knowledge regarding basic social and psychological processes. For the most part I confine my comments to the group with which I am most knowledgeable, black Americans. However, I believe that my observations are applicable to other ethnic/racial minority groups in the United States, and to research on women.

There are two assumptions that I would like to build my comments upon. The first is the fact that very good research can be done on racial/ethnic populations. There are no inherent reasons why the same theoretical and methodological rigor used in other research cannot be applied to the study of racial/ethnic groups. The second is that research on minority populations can benefit all of the social and behavioral sciences. As I conclude later, when research is conducted on different sub-cultural groups it demands a close examination of the validity and meaning of constructs, methods and procedures used in research more universally.

To argue, however, for culture, ethnicity and gender as merely differentiating political, economic, or social statuses is to run the risk of placing ourselves back at the "same old log with a different saw". It is not clear that this perspective deviates from the bankrupt "culture of poverty" approaches so popular in the social sciences in the last few decades (Holzberg, 1982; Lewis, 1966). The emerging literature on ethnicity, race and culture emphasizes the role of these factors as resources which form a context for behavior -- as does social class (Jackson, 1985). A stronger argument may be that the experiences of race, ethnicity and being a woman affect the very nature of social and psychological processes of interest in the social and behavioral sciences.

In this latter view, ethnicity, race and gender are <u>not</u> merely independent variables related to group membership and structural position. But instead, these statuses more fundamentally may relate to processes which underlie the basic fabric of perceptions, value acquisition and human interaction. Based upon this view theories of human development and aging should include as integral components how the nature of racial/ethnic status may inform the universality of these theories.

There is a growing recognition that racial and ethnic populations within the United States comprise legitimate cultural groups with identifiable shared belief and value systems and behaviors that are different from those of the larger society (Levine, 1982; Gordon, 1978; Snowden & Todman, 1982).

We have argued previously that the use of standard concepts, instruments and procedures may be inappropriate for populations who have different cultural perspectives and historical experiences (Jackson, et al., 1982). The use of identical procedures, constructs, methods and approaches developed in majority population may yield biased information that prevents valid interpretations of findings. The history of research on race and ethnicity in the United States, however, has not as a matter of course included a specific concern with cross-cultural issues (Jones, 1983). Consequently, there has not been widespread use of cross-cultural approaches to the study of behavior in intra-racial/ethnic or subcultural groups. Perhaps the growing recognition of the identifiably different cultural forms within the United States, particularly in social gerontology (Jackson, 1985) as well as a greater emphasis on cultural pluralism, will ultimately result in the reinterpretation of previous research as well as new directions and orientations for future studies (Levine, 1982; Jackson, 1985).

Constructs, instruments, and methods should be considered with an understanding of the experiences and cultural contexts that are often different from those of the white majority (Jackson, et al., 1982). Questions about the relevance of traditional psychological and social concepts and methods for blacks and other cultural groups have been raised for many years (Clark, 1965; Warwick and Lininger, 1975). However, there is a need to go beyond simple recognition of the problem and to systematically investigate the limitations and bias in the particular substantive concepts and procedures used in research on subcultural groups (Jackson, et al., 1982). For example, in a previous paper (Jackson, et al., 1982) we suggested that:

> . . . even a fairly hard and widely accepted measure such as socioeconomic level (SEL), which is typically used as an important independent variable, might have a significantly different meaning when applied to racial/ethnic individuals. A white clerk and a black clerk, each with a high school education and a $10,000 annual income may be perceived distinctly differently along some status dimensions in white and black communities, respectively. Given the pattern of oppression, racial attitudes, and other sociostructural barriers in this society, a black clerk may be afforded significantly higher status in the black community than his counterpart is in the white community. Thus, the conventional construct SEL, as it is traditionally assessed, may have different meaning for minority group persons and the assumption of comparability may lead to erroneous and inaccurate interpretations (p. 19).

Similarly the related concept of occupational prestige, which attempts to rank occupational position along a single dimension, does not necessarily take into account the nature and experience with the opportunity structure that dictates one's placement on the occupational ladder. Thus, effort and systemic factors, for example, related to obtaining a certain occupation with an associated prestige level may differ both for blacks and whites at the same and at different positions. Thus, comparisons on occupational prestige may also be meaningless, not only because of differences in prestige afforded in different communities, but also because this construct may lack the richness necessary to fully comprehend the nature of what is meant by occupational prestige. This becomes even more problematic when inter-ethnic/racial comparisons are made, particularly with whites.

Most social-psychologically based theoretical constructs are of a more conceptually abstract nature than SEL. Measures of constructs such as self-esteem, social support and familism, may be even more problematic when they are simply applied to blacks or used simplistically in a comparative research paradigm (e.g., Miller & Dreger, 1973). The following, taken from our earlier work, illustrates the problem and a possible approach:

> We may cite the concept of internal-external control which was originally developed by Rotter (1966) and his associates in studying the effect of changing reinforcements on learning, and which became strikingly prominent and popular in the research of the 1960s.

> The popularity of the concept derived from its relevance to the issues of powerlessness and alienation that were major preoccupations of that decade. Literally hundreds of studies were done using this concept and some variety of the "I-E" measure that Rotter developed. Many of these studies (notably Coleman's (1966) study on equality of educational opportunity) focused on problems of the poor, blacks, or other minorities, and attempted to document their powerlessness or "externality" as one critical aspect of their problems. Gerald Gurin, one of the principal investigators on the National Survey of Black Americans, and his associates (Gurin, Gurin, Lao and Beattie, 1969) found it necessary to rethink some of the assumptions and implications of internality and externality when used in studies on blacks. In particular, they found it necessary to make two set of distinctions not typically made in the work in this area. One distinction involved whether the belief in internal or external control reflects an individual's beliefs about the determinants of success and failure generally in our society, or whether it reflects a sense of control over one's own life directions. This distinction seemed critical in studying groups whose position in the social structure differentiated their opportunities from those of the majority group. The second set of distinctions relates to the conceptualization and measurement of externality. It is generally assumed in the internal-external literature that "internality" represents the healthier, more effective orientation. This follows partly from the fact that external orientation has generally been defined as a fatalistic belief in chance. When one applies this concept to blacks, however, it is clear that there are real external determinants that are not random, that systematically affect success and failure, and that should be perceived as limiting and constraining. An external orientation that involves a recognition of the constraints imposed by labor market conditions or racial discrimination should promote effectiveness in coping with reality instead of depressing motivation. Our colleagues have found that the distinction between personal and general control beliefs leads to different behavioral predictions, and that externality, defined in terms of sensitivity to social system determinants, predicts greater, rather than less, effectiveness (Gurin et al., 1969; Gurin and Epps, 1975). They were led to these reconceptualizations by analyses of the special meaning of internal and external control in groups deprived of power in our society. This new concept made explicit a set of implicit assumptions in the traditional concept and resulted in the development of a generally more meaningful and richer construct and methods of assessment in all groups (p. 19-20).

The multidimensionality of the I-E construct is now well established within the social science literature (Levenson, 1974) In fact, the construct of control is becoming of increasing importance as a basic organizing framework in aging research (Lachman, 1986; Baltes and Baltes, 1985). While researchers may have ultimately arrived at the multidimensional nature of the control construct through research on whites, in fact it was the pioneering study of Gurin, et al (1969) on blacks that laid the basis for the reformulation of I-E as a universally multi-dimensional construct (Levenson, 1974).

The I-E example provides a good demonstration of the problematic nature of many social science constructs and their usefulness, particularly in cross group, comparative research. Another area that appears likely for a similar reconceptualization is self-esteem. Numerous articles, books and studies over several decades have tended to document that whites have higher self-esteem than blacks and that blacks have higher self-esteem than whites. Rarely has the nature of and meaningfulness of the concept been raised. In a recent study (Bachman and O'Malley, 1984) it was found that a strong response scale bias exists for blacks. When the full Likert response scale is used then blacks score higher on self-esteem than whites. However, when the response scale is truncated to decrease the extreme scoring tendency of blacks then the observed differences disappear. They conclude that their findings indicate that observed differences between blacks and whites may be more due to differences in response styles than to differences between racial groups; stating that "those who report on racial differences -- and those who make use of such reports -- should do so with a great deal of caution" (Bachman and O'Malley, 1984).

Bachman and O'Malley (1984) focused their attention, for the most part, on the methodological and procedural issues of measurement. A more likely and basic explanation may lead to the reformulation of the concept to encompass the unique features of what being a racial/ethnic minority may contribute to the meaning, nature, and measurement of the construct of self-esteem more universally.

Conclusions

Much of what I have presented is, or should be, accepted as part of good social science research. Concern with constructs, measure, procedures and interpretations should be at the core of any research endeavor. And yet, we have had decades of social science research on black/white (male/female, Hispanic/white, etc.) differences that lack these basic canons of good research. Why? As a case in point, we have no theory of human social development and aging of different racial and ethnic groups. In fact we have barely scratched the surface of how social and personality development proceeds within middle-class, families, children, and adolescents and in middle and older age. Thus, to expect to find and interpret significant social and individual differences across comparisons of different ethnic/racial minorities is questionable. At best it must be assumed in comparative group research that one of the groups is normative and that deviations from these normative levels in other groups are somehow pathological (Levine, 1982).

Because western philosophical thought and scientific research tradition are so seeped in the comparative approach to knowledge generation, researchers have perhaps been led unwittingly to compare with little reason any and all groups. This is particularly true of groups which are subpopulations (or subcultural in our more pluralistic thinking) within the boundaries of the United States (Gordon, 1978). Brislin, et al. (1973) and others have described methods, approaches and issues to be addressed when conducting cross-national/cross-cultural research. Often these guidelines are not followed in situations in which the need for extra sensitivity, understanding and the types of cautions that I have described would seem to be needed. Because the emphasis has been largely on language equivalence, much less attention has been focused on groups who may differ on major status dimensions but who may share a common general language (although this common language may also be questioned, Labov, 1972, for example). Concepts, such as Internal-External Control that I described earlier, take on greater meaning when studied intra-culturally and are shown to be highly sensitive to position in and perceptions of the larger opportunity structure. As I have suggested here, this intra-cultural approach can lead to a rethinking and reformulation of the entire construct and hopefully a richer and more meaningful one for all groups and for the science more generally.

It should be clear that I believe that research on basic processes and behaviors of racial/ethnic minorities or women can be and should be within the mainstream of the social and behavioral sciences. First, any researcher (minority/women, or not) should be "free" and encouraged to explore the nature of intra-subcultural groups. Purely from an "emic" perspective this research, if conducted properly, furthers our knowledge and understanding of the particular group in question. Second, research of this nature can contribute to our general scientific understanding of particular processes in the more "etic" sense -- that is those processes which are more basic across various subcultural groups. This latter goal would seem to be consistent with our more general mission to understand and explain human behavior. It is not my understanding that our scientific mission is to understand and explain white behavior, and certainly not white male behavior. My modest expectation is that the field will begin to recognize that cultural diversity, studied intra-subculturally, may contribute to our knowledge base through the process of generalization and through the expansion and better understanding of the nature and meaning of general constructs and their interrelationships.

My hope is that greater attention to these issues will increase the quality of research and accuracy of data on black Americans and other ethnic and racial groups. If the concern is with increasing our scientific knowledge and providing relevant social policy data, then social and behavioral

science researchers must be cognizant of and attend to the elements of culture and life-style that characterize different ethnic/racial groups. This sensitivity has not been particularly evident in much previous theory and research in social gerontology (Levine, 1982). I hope that the general framework, methods and procedures tentatively presented here may contribute to the nature of future work. And, perhaps, result in some point in a focus within the social sciences, that: (1) is truly pluralistic in orientation; (2) considers the important contribution that cultural diversity can make to expanding our conceptualizations, constructs, and methods; and (3) assists in the evolution of a science of human development and aging that is more universal.

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